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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association during the 25-year period in the last half of the 19th century when the association formed a Reading Circle, held Social Meetings, and finally established a Ladies' Library Club. The Reading Circle met weekly and bi-weekly between 1861-1868; the Social Meetings took place once a month between 1856 and 1861 and again in 1867, while the Ladies' Library Club began in 1873 and met until the 1890s. Each group discussed and studied various topics and literary works and had its own rules and procedures. The Reading Club, for example, allowed male membership and participation. The paper focuses on the structure and topics of the Reading Circle and the Social Meetings and the differences in approach. It examines not only what was studied but also the way gender influenced differences in the reception of and interpretation of literature by men and women in the Reading Circle. It also explores topics discussed in the Social Meeting where some participants felt more freedom to state opinions and extend the discussion of topics over several weeks. Changes in the focus for the study groups between the pre-Civil-War era and the post-Civil-War era are considered in the paper as well. Contains 32 notes and 4 references. (NKA)

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"A Delightful Entertainment" : Study groups as part of the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association

by
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San Diego, California,
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Over a period of roughly twenty-five years the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association formed a Reading Circle, held Social Meetings and finally established a Ladies' Library Club. The Reading Circle met weekly and bi-weekly between 1861-1868 while the Social Meetings took place once a month between 1856 and 1861 and then again in 1867. The Ladies' Library Club began in 1873 and met until the 1890s. Each group discussed and studied various topics and literary works. The Reading Circle, unlike most study clubs affiliated with L.L.A.'s, allowed male membership and participation. Records provide weekly thoughts about literary works by Dickens, Shakespeare, Emerson, Gail Hamilton and others, from both the male and female perspective. The Social Meeting was limited to female members and topics focused on domestic and social issues such as what children should read and how much women should read. Records from this group include abstracts of papers and secretary's minutes about the meetings. When the group reconvened following the Civil War, the women focused on scientific and historical topics. This second phase served as a bridge for a later study club known as the Ladies Library Club which was similar to many late 19th century women's study groups.

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In this paper I will focus on the structure and topics of the Reading Circle and the Social Meetings and the differences in approach. I will examine not only what was studied but also the way gender influenced differences in reception of and interpretation of literature by men and women in the Reading Circle. I will also examine topics discussed in the Social Meeting where some felt more freedom to state opinions and extend the discussion of topics over several weeks. Changes in the focus for the study groups between the pre-Civil War and the post Civil War era will be considered as well.

The Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association embarked upon an experiment on January 4, 1861 when it organized a weekly Reading Circle. It held its first meeting on January 12, 1861, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas. Meetings were initially held on Friday evening but were later moved to Wednesday evenings. The group met from the late fall through the spring months, unless the weather prohibited it. Tickets were sold for $1.00 for the season.

Although forming a Reading Circle was not an unusual move for a Ladies' Library Association, Kalamazoo's Reading Circle was an anomaly because male members were not only admitted, they were allowed to participate in the meetings. The minutes of January 29, 1866, note that the women could have excluded men but that these "republican dames" would not do so. [1]

The minutes and membership rolls reveal that many prominent citizens of Kalamazoo attended and participated in the Reading Circle meetings. Among those who took part were bankers, lawyers, the founders of churches and presidents of the village. Mr. and Mrs. T. P. Sheldon (banker), Mr. and Mrs. Luther H. Trask (lawyer, surveyor and president of the village), Mr. and Mrs. D. B. Webster (judge) and Col.

Frederick Curteniss were among those who regularly attended the evening discussions.[2] These members and others had moved to Kalamazoo from the Eastern United States, primarily New York, Vermont and Massachusetts. These families were what Nancy Woloch describes as "Middle-class Americans [who] had rising incomes, expectations and living standards."[3] The Reading Circle provided an opportunity for them to gather not only for an intellectual activity, but also for social interaction.

Apprehension existed among those who attended the early meetings about the potential for this venture. The reporter for the first meeting wrote that there was a greater turnout than expected, proving that the L.L.A. did have influence in Kalamazoo. Unfortunately the exact number was not recorded. At the second meeting the reporter wrote, "Being an Institution of very recent birth we all felt some degree of anxiety to know if this young Hand Maid of the Association still lived and promised a healthy growth."[4] The prominent families wanted to use their time properly and morally. Forming a Reading Circle assured the members that they were not isolated in the wilderness, but resided in a place that was civilized. Regular study and discussion also support the higher standard of living that middle-class Americans were cultivating.

Beyond studying literary works, the members realized the importance of the social contacts that they made at these meetings and viewed it as their mission to improve not only the members of the Reading Circle but society in general. On February 9, 1861, Caroline Woodbury wrote that the membership knew it possessed social abilities and that "their thoughts directed to something higher than the ordinary chit chat of general society and this in time gives a better tone to that same society."[5]

From time to time complaints were recorded about the lack of structure for the

Reading Circle meetings. However, there did seem to be at least an attempt at an agenda though no officers were in charge to make sure the meeting remained on schedule. Social time began and ended meetings which started around 7:30 p.m. and lasted for about two hours. Reading from a selected text followed the social time. Following this, an intermission allowed for some informal discussion before the "criticism." This pattern was then repeated. Before the final social time another report was delivered by the previous week's recorder and announcements were given. Musical entertainments were sometimes performed during the intermissions and were considered a special treat. These meetings combined intellectual and social activity that the members recognized as important facets of the group.

The only assigned role was that of reporter or recorder for the meeting. Sometimes the reporter volunteered for the duty and at other times he or she was coerced to serve in the role, as will be seen in the examples which follow. It was this person's duty to summarize the readings and add impressions about the quality and value of the evening. In the midst of some of the more learned members of the group and important members of Kalamazoo society, some reporters felt inadequate. F. C. VanWych writes that she could not think of a "reasonable excuse" to rescue herself from the duty. Since the previous reports were not available to her for some reason, she could not "give you a stereotyped form" of the report.[6] J. A. Dewing, a regular reporter, takes a lighter tone when he writes,

> I find myself seated to the formidable task of writing not a petition to the President nor a letter of Condolence or sympathy to the Queen, but a report of the first meeting for this season of our Reading Circle. I recall as

> I write the horror and surprise, expressed in various countenances, at the bare mention of these writing and reading a report.[7]

Mr. Dewing had no problems writing or delivering reports but he recognized that many of his cohorts did and could not pass the chance to poke fun at them. The year 1863 seemed to be a particularly difficult one for locating willing reporters. Attendance declined due to the war and those not accustomed to having to take on the duty were forced to. When there was an opportunity to make someone do it who was unaware, the members obviously did as can be noted in the March 1863 entry.

> "I was a stranger and ye took me in" I had heard much of the Reading Circle, and it was with pleased alacrity that I accepted the *apparently disinterested* invitation to attend its meeting... Unsuspiciously I entered the bright cheery rooms, thinking only of the promised pleasure, and unwitting of the impending penalty of making a report. I left the rooms a wiser, if not sadder woman.[8]

Most of the writers accepted the duty without complaint and served in the role over and over again.

Unlike the Reading Circle, the Social Meetings and the Library Club were both governed by a set of by-laws. As mentioned both of these groups met on a weekday afternoon. The Social Meetings were conducted once a month while the Library Club met weekly from the fall until early summer.

The Social Meetings began in 1856 when, "desirous of extending the beneficial influence of their society, [the association] invited all its members to meet once in every month for mutual consultation on subjects which they might deem important and

improving."[9] The commencement of this group required an amendment to the L.L.A. by-laws allowing for an affiliated body. The addition to the L.L.A. by-laws provided for the election of a separate President and Secretary to be elected each January and allowed the by-laws to be "changed or amended at any regular meeting of the society, by a vote of two thirds of the members present."[10] Membership in this society was contingent upon membership in the association.

The members of the Social Meetings also wrote rules of order which provided for calling the meeting to order, delivering reports, conducting business and discussing the topic for the day. Two rules provided for a stricter order than seemed to be present in the Reading Circle. Number five stated that following the reading of articles, "Conversation shall be in order, or illustrative incidents related, at the close of any article, or paragraph, as the subject shall seem to suggest."[11] Number six stipulated that only "one shall speak at a time, and it is desirable that all conversation should be addressed to the President."[12] While addressing all the comments to the President gave her a certain degree of power to direct the discussion, it also assured that order would be maintained. Free flowing conversation would be avoided and the women would remain focused on the topic at hand.

After its hiatus between 1861-1867, the women decided to keep the same name for the Social Meetings. They amended the by-laws, to make sure only L.L.A. members were allowed to attend meetings, but recorded no explanation for the stricter wording. The new by-law read "No one can be admitted as members of these meetings but members of the L.L. Ass.[13] and all members must have their names enrolled as such."[14] Only women who were members of the L.L.A. were allowed to attend this meeting in the

original form. Obviously, non-members had been allowed to attend and perhaps had taken advantage of the privilege. There were no additional dues to take part in the Social Meetings; therefore, women who were not members of the association would have participated without contributing to the well being of the library. The by-law may also have been a way to reinforce that this was a group for women, not for men.

Attendance at the Social Meetings seemed to fluctuate just like the attendance at the Reading Circle. Again, there are few instances where actual numbers are recorded, but the group does not seem to have been very large for most of the time that it first met. The few times that attendance was recorded there were around 30 present. The same women took part in the Reading Circle and the Social Meetings, which seemed to cause problems. The debate about continuing the Social Meetings was tied to the amount of time the women spent in both groups. When they disbanded in 1861, lack of time was the primary reason.

Topics of study were the most important aspect of study groups since they were the primary reason for existence. The groups discussed in this paper took different approaches to study. The Reading Circle concentrated on all genres of what we would now refer to as canonical literature. In the Social Meetings women examined a mixture of domestic and social themes either through writing original papers on a topic or by locating a relevant article. When Social Meetings began again in 1867, following the Civil War, women studied scientific and historical topics, again through original papers and articles.

The Reading Circle did a particularly good job of recording its activities which provides the reader with a picture of what members read and what they thought about

the reading. Three volumes of minutes for the years 1861-1868 survive for the Reading Circle. These minutes include reports from each meeting and copies of Lucinda Hinsdale Stone's yearly addresses to the group.

William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens were favorites of the group. Selections from The Eclectic, a popular magazine, were frequently included. Gail Hamilton, John Greenleaf Whittier, Robert Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Lamb and Francis Bacon were also among the authors who caught the circle's attention. On several occasions the members read their own verse to the assembly. Each week a different reporter recorded the events of the evening as well as his or her impressions of the readings and the meeting. Mrs. Stone urged the reporters to provide "a sketch" of readings because this "may at some future time prove an interesting volume in the Library of the Association."[15] Her prophetic words were correct. Examining passages from several readings allows us not only to see what the members thought about literature, but also to compare the responses of both genders.

Notes taken by the reporters demonstrate their levels of literacy. Reports show the understanding of the novels and literature studied as well as an understanding and interpretation of the conversation that took place about the works. Connecting social issues and current events to the literary works and discussions that were taking place also demonstrates educational levels.

Shakespearean plays were usually read in their entirety if time allowed. The following passage written by J. O. Seely reflects sympathetic feelings toward the characters in the Merchant of Venice, "As is usual in the reading of this play, the sympathies of those present were enlisted in behalf of Antonio, the so styled Christian,

as was also their disgust for Shylock the caricature of the Jew."[16] The reporter continues, expressing criticism against Shakespeare and his "representation of Christian character."[17] The reporter communicates that he is writing not just for himself, but for the whole Reading Circle. Of Shylock, J. O. Seely writes, "We have always felt that it was too bad for Shylock to personate the sons of Abraham. Shakespeare often evinces an enmity toward the Israelites [sic] race, leading one to think him ignorant of, or a disbeliever of the glorious promises concerning the Jews."[18]

When Lucia Eames wrote about the reading of As You Like It, she admitted that it was "worse than useless to attempt a criticism upon Shakespeare and folly to give any abstract of the play since all must know the story."[19] She did complain that the play "proved too long for the most patient of the number"[20] and that several scenes were cut as a result. This meeting took place on April 10, 1861, a few days before the beginning of the Civil War. Obviously the members' minds were upon the troubles of the country, and Mrs. Eames worked in an allusion of the coming war.

> There is a time in certain very dangerous fevers called the crisis; which having been attained all anxiety ceases, and certainty takes the place of doubt and fear. So in this play as in similar plays which are being enacted among us almost daily. We need only go to a certain point to guess at the whole truth.[21]

Mr. Seely was obviously more comfortable criticizing Shakespeare and his writing than was Mrs. Eames. He also addressed the moral and religious issues that he saw in the play rather than just praising Shakespeare as a great writer. While the nature of the two plays is entirely different, the rhetoric of Mrs. Eames and of other entries written by

women suggests that they were not as willing to be critical of literature or of the discussions. There are exceptions, of course. Social issues do find their way into both the writings of male and female recorders. Confidence in their abilities to record events and impressions is an issue for most of the reporters, however, especially as the war accelerates and the pool of reporters diminishes, requiring less confident members to record their thoughts about the meetings.

Unlike the Reading Circle, the Social Meetings emphasized domestic and social issues rather than literature. Later, during the second phase of the Social Meetings beginning in 1867, the women explored what they classified as scientific and historical topics. Minutes remain from both phases of the Social Meetings. Early minutes were reconstructed from memory because the group had not assigned secretarial responsibilities to a member. The practice of including abstracts of papers did not last throughout the history of this study group. No complete papers have survived to my knowledge. Women did not ignore literature; however, they discussed it in the context of what was moral or what was a good influence on themselves and on their children. Selections of a variety of topics could be influenced by who actually attended the meeting that week. Frequently the minutes reveal that topics were continued because women did not feel that they had exhausted what they had to say on a subject. Papers were also sometimes repeated because the women wanted to hear them again or because a member who was preparing a paper did not attend on the day her paper was scheduled. It is not clear if the papers were kept at the library or if women brought their collections of the papers they had written with them each week.

The first subject that the Social Meetings addressed was "Why are not American

women as healthy as the Europeans?"[22] This topic took several meetings to discuss, according to the minutes. Mrs. Cadman and Mrs. L. Slater contributed articles for the discussion. Mrs. Cadman concluded that "all our faculties are strengthened by use and weakened by disuse" and that American women do not compare favorably to European women, "especially in regard to our physical condition." Mrs. Slater focused on parents and children. She wrote "The spirit of independence is manifested in young America as he pushes with eager haste into that extravagance and insubordination that end often in physical and moral ruin." She includes an example, writing that "the mother would not crush the spirit of the daughter" and, therefore, indulges her whims even if they do her harm. The English mother, on the other hand, "has dignity and authority and the daughter bows in submission, hence dress, exercise and amusements are more in accordance with health and propriety."[23]

Other early topics included "What benefits be derived from our Social Meetings?", "How to correct public opinion so as to make house work a reputable employment?", "How shall we improve our conversational powers?" and "Our duties to the Rising Generation."[24] From this list we can see that the women were concerned about self-improvement and improving their families. These kinds of topics continued to be the focus of papers and articles until 1861.

During the meeting of February 29, 1860, an "animated and spirited" discussion on the "subject of amusements" took place.[25] Concern was expressed about individuals who disagreed with the staging of tableaux. "It was thought that a few individuals in some of our churches objected to tableaux and kindred amusements."[26] The women discussed this and thought they should take into account who it was who objected in an

effort to understand their reasons. "Mrs. Stone replied that position in society or the church did not necessarily exempt men from narrow mindedness."[27] The women present decided "tableaux were unanimously considered to be innocuous amusements."[28]

Literature did occupy the women's minds and was a focus of discussion from time to time. Generally the topics concentrated on who their favorite author was or whether topics such as what a "suitable book for young people of 15 or so" would be. When asked to select a favorite author, one woman "found it as difficult to choose her favorite author as her favorite color."[29] Most of the women selected male authors as their favorites. As in the Reading Circle, Dickens was a favorite author for the women. Mrs. Eames finally concluded that, "Scott comes to us as a draught of cold water, in a thirsty and weary moment rising and strengthening, without any effort, on the part of the recipients, while Dickens reads us a lesson of love for the erring and unfortunate." She goes on to say that Dickens "writes as a bird sings, because he can't help it!"[30] Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Kingsley were also selected as favorite authors.

In the second era of the Social Meetings (1867-68) women selected subjects like the "Tides" or "the Wind" or "Druids." There are no explanations about why these topics were selected, but the women who presented the papers had to read and research their topics, presumably from the collections of the L.L.A. Minutes from these meetings are shorter and not always as detailed as those from the first phase.

An early discussion on etiquette concerned the Reading Circle. The women felt that when music was performed "the practice of inviting any one to play and then drown[ing] the music by conversation and laughter was ... impolite and insulting to the performer beyond all endurance."[31] The women could not decide what to do about this

"evil" behavior but were sure that those who talked while performers attempted to entertain did not really mean to be rude. However, "the thoughtlessness of those who do thus disturb the music is certainly reprehensible."[32]

The archival records available for the study groups in Kalamazoo provide evidence that the educational mission of the Ladies' Library Association was important. The topics studied reveal an interest in literature and in current social topics of the era. Consistent with the women's club movement, the women in Kalamazoo were concerned about mental development and self-improvement.

Endnotes

1. Reading Circle Minutes, 29 January 1865, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

2. Information was gathered from C. E. LaGrave, Kalamazoo County Directory, comprising a complete Business Directory of Kalamazoo Village and Other Villages in the County (Kalamazoo, Mich.: A.J. Shakespeare, Books and Job Printer, 1873) and Willis F. Dunbar, Kalamazoo and How it Grew (Kalamazoo, Mich. : School of Graduate Studies, Western Michigan University, 1959).

3. Nancy Woloch, Women and The American Experience: A Concise History (New York: Overture Books, 1996) 115.

4. Reading Circle, 18 January 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

5. Reading Circle, 9 February 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collection, WMU.

6. Reading Circle, 15 January 1862, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

7. Reading Circle, 3 December 1862, Kalamazoo L.L.A. Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

8. Reading Circle, March 1863, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

9. Record of the Social Meetings of the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU. Hereafter, Social Meetings, date, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

10. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

11. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

12. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

13. Their abbreviation.

14. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

15. Reading Circle, 18 January 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

16. Reading Circle, 19 March 1862, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

17. Reading Circle, 19 March 1862, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

18. Reading Circle, 19 March 1862, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

19. Reading Circle, 10 April 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

20. Reading Circle, 10 April 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

21. Reading Circle, 10 April 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

22. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

23. Social Meetings, 1856, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

24. Social Meetings, taken from various minutes, 1856-1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections, WMU.

25. Social Meetings, 29 February 1860, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

26. Social Meetings, 29 February 1860, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

27. Social Meetings, 29 February 1860, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

28. Social Meetings, 29 February 1860, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

29. Social Meetings, 27 February 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

30. Social Meetings, 27 February 1861, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

31. Social Meetings, January 1868, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

32. Social Meetings, January 1868, Kalamazoo L.L.A., Archives and Regional History Collections; WMU.

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